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ABSTRACT

This booklet discusses the importance of a community-wide approach to asset building, exploring how individuals, organizations, and communities can collaborate to build developmental assets. Principles to guide community asset-building efforts include: strengths versus risks or deficits, relationships versus programs, engagement with youth versus services for youth, and long-term versus quick fix. Communities can organize their asset-building efforts by taking a bubble-up approach, linking existing efforts, creating community-wide coalitions, and engaging youth as partners. Strategies for mobilizing communities for asset building include mobilizing a critical mass of adults; engaging youth; infusing asset building into organizations, sectors, and systems; promoting asset-based messages, policies, practices, and opportunities; and supporting, promoting, and linking community asset building efforts. Five phases in the change process are: receptivity (cultivating openness to change); awareness (highlighting the possibility of change); mobilization (organizing for change); action (making change happen); and continuity (ensuring that the change becomes a way of life). There is no script that says precisely what part each community member plays in this effort. Rather, there is a shared commitment to strengthening the community for children and adolescents, with all players offering their creativity, skills, and imagination to create something together. (SM)

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AN ASSET APPROACH TO POSITIVE COMMUNITY CHANGE

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2001

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to positive community change

In 1995, Neil Nicoll gathered a group of community leaders. "My real frustration," the president of the YMCA of Greater Seattle recalls, "was that we had been slogging away on youth issues for nearly three decades and didn't feel we'd made progress." Their quest for new approaches led them to Search Institute's framework of developmental assets and its invitation for everyone to get involved in strengthening communities for young people.

Soon, the Seattle leaders formed a community-wide initiative called It's About Time . . . for Kids, with a vision of a community "where children are valued and cared for by all adults so that their lives are rich in developmental assets."

Across the continent in Gorham, Maine, Barry Atwood discovered the importance of a community-wide approach to asset building. He's a dad, independent video producer, and volunteer in the school district and community. He has been, in his words, "a ringleader" in organizing an asset-building initiative, serving on the board and working with task forces to build the developmental assets of Gorham children and youth.

Far south of Seattle and Gorham, in Oklahoma City, Sharon Rodine of the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy was helping to launch a teen pregnancy prevention initiative, funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "We had seen major coalitions come and go, and we wanted a new path," she says. She was familiar with the asset framework, so she designed the prevention effort with an asset-building approach. She also networked with others in the community to integrate asset building into their efforts.

Nicoll, Rodine, and Atwood have very different roles in very different communities. Yet they have something in common: They're promoting asset building and positive change for children and youth.

Hundreds of communities across North America embrace the framework of developmental assets as a call to action and cooperation. But how do individuals, organizations, and communities work together to build these assets? This booklet explores that question, addressing the goals of asset building, how initiatives are structured, and how communities can move from awareness raising to making asset building a way of life.

40 ASSETS KIDS NEED TO SUCCEED

The framework of developmental assets identifies crucial relationships, experiences, opportunities, and personal qualities that children and adolescents need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. Surveys of 6th- to 12th-grade youth consistently show that the more assets young people experience, the more likely they are to make positive choices and avoid high-risk behaviors. Yet, on average, young people experience only 18 of the 40 assets.

EXTERNAL ASSETS

Support
1 Family support
2 Positive family communication
3 Other adult relationships
4 Caring neighborhood
5 Caring school climate
6 Parent involvement in schooling

Empowerment
7 Community values youth
8 Youth as resources
9 Service to others
10 Safety

Boundaries and Expectations
11 Family boundaries
12 School boundaries
13 Neighborhood boundaries
14 Adult role models
15 Positive peer influence
16 High expectations

Constructive Use of Time
17 Creative activities
18 Youth programs
19 Religious community
20 Time at home

INTERNAL ASSETS

Commitment to Learning
21 Achievement motivation
22 School engagement
23 Homework
24 Bonding to school
25 Reading for pleasure

Positive Values
26 Caring
27 Equality and social justice
28 Integrity
29 Honesty
30 Responsibility
31 Restraint

Social Competencies
32 Planning and decision making
33 Interpersonal competence
34 Cultural competence
35 Resistance skills
36 Peaceful conflict resolution

Positive Identity
37 Personal power
38 Self-esteem
39 Sense of purpose
40 Positive view of personal future

FOR MORE INFORMATION: *The Asset Approach: Giving Kids What They Need to Succeed, A Fragile Foundation: The State of Developmental Assets among American Youth,* and *Developmental Assets: A Synthesis of the Scientific Research on Adolescent Development,* all published by Search Institute. Definitions of each asset, adaptations for younger children, background research, and other information are available at www.search-institute.org/assets.

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Principles to Guide Your Community's Asset-Building Efforts

As you begin exploring how to shape your community's asset-building efforts, reflect on some of the guiding values of asset building. We consistently see that the most energetic communities build their initiatives upon certain core asset-building principles.

STRENGTHS MORE THAN RISKS OR DEFICITS

Instead of focusing on reducing problems, risks, or deficits, asset building focuses on building strengths. This approach doesn't eliminate the need to address problems or provide services; rather it complements those efforts.

- What are sources of strength for young people in your community?
- How can they be celebrated and enhanced through asset building?

ENGAGEMENT *WITH* YOUTH, MORE THAN SERVICES *FOR* YOUTH

Community initiatives can too quickly focus on how to "serve" youth or "meet young people's needs"—which can assume that young people are the consumers or recipients of services, not resources, contributors, and leaders. Engaging youth as partners boosts both authenticity and energy.

- Where in your community have young people been engaged as partners with adults? How can you learn from and build on those efforts?

RELATIONSHIPS MORE THAN PROGRAMS

When communities learn about asset building, they often assume that they simply need to start new programs. The danger in this approach is that people presume that the program—not the people of the community—is responsible for building assets. Programs can be useful resources for building assets, equipping people to build assets, and strengthening relationships. But they cannot replace the power of a community of people who are committed to building assets in all aspects of their daily lives.

- How can you promote an emphasis on strengthening relationships within families, among peers, within schools and other institutions, and across generations?

UNLEASHING, NOT CONTROLLING OR DIRECTING

As individuals and organizations begin shaping their own approaches and priorities for asset building within the community, it's important not to try to control or manage their efforts. As Karen Atkinson of Children First in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, says: "Give it away. The idea isn't to hold the power or hold the information. Once they own it . . . that's the best testimonial that we've done the right thing."

- How will you balance a need for consistency and coordination among asset-building efforts while also promoting innovation?
- How will you guide without constricting others' ownership and creativity?

ALL ADULTS AND YOUTH, NOT JUST PROFESSIONALS AND PARENTS

Asset building emphasizes inspiring, inviting, and equipping *all* types of community residents—including professionals, parents, other adults, and young people—to contribute to the well-being of children and adolescents.

- How will an emphasis on engaging everyone influence your priorities and strategies?

LONG TERM, NOT A QUICK FIX

The developmental assets provide a framework for long-term action that recognizes the importance of ongoing, positive opportunities and relationships across at least the first two decades of life.

- What kind of leadership and support do you need to sustain interest and engagement for long-term, positive change?
- How can you generate "early successes" without losing sight of the long-term vision?

FOR MORE INFORMATION: *All Kids Are Our Kids: What Communities Must Do to Raise Caring and Responsible Children and Adolescents*, by Search Institute president Peter L. Benson, describes how asset building is different from other youth-focused community mobilization efforts, as well as the principles that undergird an asset-building approach (available from Search Institute).

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How Will Your Community Organize Its Asset-Building Efforts?

The basic tasks of a community asset-building initiative are similar to planting seeds, tending them as they mature, and cross-pollinating where it makes sense. In other words, if you're inviting people to join with you in asset building, your basic role will be to share the approach with them, be a resource as their commitment grows, and connect them with others when doing so will strengthen their efforts. There are, however, many different ways to organize those activities.

Take a "Bubble-Up" Approach

Jerry Mogul of the Mayor's Office on Community Partnerships in Boston explains: "I've been very reluctant to formalize some kind of citywide coalition. . . . Then you start dealing with organizations, rules, who's in, who's out, and roles." Instead, he encourages organizations and sectors that take action. "It's just starting to bubble up, and we'll see where it goes."

Link Existing Efforts

When Sharon Rodine began exploring how to promote asset building in Oklahoma City, it was clear that the community didn't want another single-issue coalition. So they created what Rodine calls a "barnacle coalition" and began infusing asset building into "anything that floated by that was focused on youth." She explains: "The asset approach provided an anchor to which a lot of groups could attach. . . . It was value added."

Create a Community-Wide Coalition

Many communities form an asset-building coalition or integrate asset building into the mission of an existing coalition. Boise, Idaho, created a strategic plan and a formal structure to support asset building. Five founding agencies (the city, the YMCA, United Way, the major medical center, and the school district) are each providing staffing and operating support for a three-year period.

ENGAGING YOUTH AS PARTNERS

Communities find particular power when they engage young people as leaders, allies, and partners in asset building. High school students Harmonie Mason of Hampton, Virginia, and Emily Silberstein of Mason City, Iowa, share insights for effectively involving youth:

- **Get Them Actively Involved**
  "You need youth input and help," says Silberstein. "You can't do it yourself, and you can't, as an adult, do things for youth [without] their input to see what's going to work."
- **Help Young People Relate to Asset Building**
  "Make assets cool," Mason says. "You have to make young people see how [assets] are important to them, why you're doing what you're doing—make it something young people want to do."
- **Invite Youth and Adults to Work Side by Side**
  "That's the whole key to the initiative," Silberstein says. "They look at us . . . as people who have wonderful things to share. I can't tell you how great that is."
- **Look Out for the "Cute Factor"**
  Mason explains: "First they were looking at us as, 'Oh, they're so cute.'" The team overcame this perception by being sure they were well prepared and professional in their presentations to adult audiences.
- **Prepare Young People for Their Roles**
  Silberstein says she has learned a lot about how to interact with adults and work with systems and groups in the community.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Written in partnership with young people, *Step by Step: A Young Person's Guide to Positive Community Change* offers practical steps for how youth can plan and lead asset building efforts (available from Search Institute).

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Mobilizing Your Community for Asset Building

Communities have extraordinary capacity to build developmental assets. Strengthening the asset foundation for all kids has less to do with money, policy, programs, and professionals—the traditional levers of change—and more to do with unleashing the latent asset-building capacities of a community's people and all of the settings in which the lives of adults and youth intersect.

What needs to happen in your community to make it a place where young people have access to and experience more developmental assets? We have identified five broad, overarching strategies:

1

MOBILIZE
a critical mass of adults for asset building

MAJOR STRATEGIES

BENEFITS

- More people in the community recognize and act upon their responsibility to contribute to young people's well-being.
- Young people feel valued and supported throughout their community.
- Parents feel supported and connected, with many resources for them and their children in the community.

EXAMPLES

- Launch a Porch Cookie Campaign in which residents invite youth and adult neighbors over for cookies and conversation. [FINDLAY, OHIO]
- Organize a parent resource center that brings together a wide range of education and support resources for parents of children and teenagers. [BOISE, IDAHO]

1 **Mobilize a critical mass of adults for asset building.** Much of a community's asset-building potential lies in informal daily relationships and personal commitments of the adults who live, work, or spend time in the community. This certainly includes parents and professionals who work with children and youth, but an important emphasis is on reaching other adults who haven't been expected to be resources for kids.

2 **Engage youth in building assets for themselves, their peers, and younger children.** Young people have tremendous potential as asset builders by engaging in asset-promoting activities and relationships, through nurturing their peers' assets, and by reaching out to younger children to build their assets. Provide young people with the encouragement, skills, and opportunities to be proactive asset builders themselves.

3 **Infuse asset building into organizations, sectors, and systems.** All sectors and organizations in a community—including schools, congregations, neighborhoods, youth organizations, social service agencies, health-care providers, employers, and others—have potential for asset building. Focus on mobilizing, equipping, and supporting institutions and sectors as they become stronger resources and allies for asset building by infusing asset building into the culture, programs, and practices of each organization.

4 **Promote asset-based messages, policies, practices, and opportunities.** Cultivate and reinforce a shared vision and consistent messages that align the people and institutions in contributing to the healthy development of young people. In some cases, this strategy involves developing new programs and activities (such as mentoring, service-learning, or safe, supervised places for young people to spend time) to fill gaps in the community's asset-building resources.

5 **Support, promote, and link the community's asset-building efforts.** This final strategy is the work of an initiative, coalition, or organization that is supporting the community's asset-building work. Rather than seeing its role as *doing* the community's asset building, the initiative focuses on inspiring and equipping the people, places, and systems of the community to engage in asset-building action.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Connect with other asset building champions at the annual Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth Conference, hosted by Search Institute. For information, visit www.search-institute.org.
- *Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth Tool Kit*, a comprehensive collection of ideas and tools for numerous aspects of starting and sustaining a community asset-building initiative (available from Search Institute).
- *Assets: The Magazine of Ideas for Healthy Communities & Healthy Youth*, a quarterly periodical with stories and ideas from across the country. To subscribe, call 877-240-7251.
- For a comprehensive listing of resources to assist you in organizing an initiative and addressing the five overall strategies, visit www.search-institute.org/communities.

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2 ENGAGE YOUTH

in building assets for themselves, their peers, and younger children

- The community taps the creativity and positive energy of its young people for community building.
- Young people feel more connected to and supported by their peer groups.
- Young people see themselves as positive resources and guides for each other and for younger children.

- Give young people minigrants to support asset-building activities—like a tutoring program for children in a housing project. [PORTLAND, OREGON]
- Form a youth commission that not only advises city government on policies but also has a significant budget to support asset building. [HAMPTON, VIRGINIA]

3 INFUSE

asset building into organizations, sectors, and systems

- Schools, congregations, neighborhoods, youth organizations, social service agencies, health-care providers, employers, and other organizations deepen their asset-building capacity.
- Numerous organizations and systems support the community's asset-building efforts as a long-term focus.

- Form a network of youth agencies to learn about and share best practices in asset building. [BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS]
- Work with high schools to add comments on student strengths to report cards, and include students on hiring committees for new faculty. [NEW RICHMOND, WISCONSIN]

4 PROMOTE

asset-based messages, policies, practices, and opportunities

- People are consistently reminded of asset building and their role in it.
- New residents are introduced to the focus.
- Asset building becomes embedded in policies, programs, and practices throughout the community.

- Each week, use newspaper articles, radio spots, and school activities to highlight how people can build a particular asset. [MASON CITY, IOWA]
- Provide training in effective, asset-based after-school programs (or other asset-building opportunities) for schools and other organizations. [COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO]

5 SUPPORT, PROMOTE, AND LINK THE COMMUNITY'S ASSET-BUILDING EFFORTS

Cultivate a Shared Vision

Invite community members to envision and keep alive a shared vision for an asset-rich community.

Communicate

Distribute information, make presentations, and tap the media to raise awareness about asset building and local efforts.

Reflect, Learn, and Celebrate

Reflect on and learn from current progress and challenges. Highlight and honor asset-building efforts in the community.

Recruit and Network Champions

Nurture relationships with people who have the passion to spread the word and help make the vision a reality. Provide opportunities for these champions to learn from, support, and inspire each other.

Strengthen Capacity

Provide or facilitate training, technical assistance, coaching, tools, or other resources that help individuals and organizations in their asset-building efforts.

Manage and Coordinate

Manage and coordinate schedules, budgets, and other administrative tasks, as needed.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

About the Vision and Major Strategies:

- What is your vision for asset building in your community?
- Which of these elements are already in place in your community to support that vision? How can they be strengthened and linked?
- Where do you see gaps? What community resources could fill those gaps?
- How will you balance or emphasize each of the overall strategies? (Many initiatives focus on one area at a time, knowing that there are others to address over the long term.)
- How will you be intentional about revisiting your vision, strategies, and approaches to ensure that they still make sense as time passes and realities shift?

About the Support Infrastructure:

- What can community members do together that will enhance and expand individual efforts? How can you focus on these areas as joint strategies?
- What kind of staffing is needed to sustain your approach? (Communities often find that they need at least a part-time coordinator to maintain momentum, focus, and connections.)
- How will you fund your initiative's activities? (Many coordinators believe that it's best if core support comes from the community, not from one-time outside grants.)
- How will you renew and expand commitment and leadership over time?

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What Is Your Community Ready For?

Some people and organizations in your community may already know about and be working on asset building. Others may be open to the ideas and, with a little guidance, can move forward quickly and creatively. Some may get stuck in moving from the theory to real action. Still others may have reservations, questions, or concerns.

Search Institute is learning that individuals, organizations, groups, and communities follow a similar pathway of change as they seek to make asset building a way of life. While there is a logical progression among these phases, rarely do they unfold sequentially. People and organizations cycle in and out of the process, moving at different paces or in a different order. People and institutions within the community are at different phases of engagement and commitment. Thus, community asset-building work is fluid, with sometimes surprising shifts, twists, turns, starts, and stops.

It's impossible, then, to predict or plan exactly what will happen next as a community, organization, or individual embraces asset building. Yet it can be helpful to reflect on where you are in this change process so that you can focus your energies in ways that will help you move toward deeper engagement and commitment. We have identified five phases in the change process:

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"Have patience. . . . Understand that this is long-term social change we're talking about."

RAY LARSEN [ORLANDO, FLORIDA]

"Just don't give up. Present at every opportunity that is provided for you, and then encourage people that it's not as overwhelming as it seems. Just break it down into small pieces."

JANE FRETZ [ALLENTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA]

WHERE IS YOUR COMMUNITY ALONG THE PATHWAY OF CHANGE?

- As you review the five phases, who in your community is at different phases in their commitment to asset building?
- Who may not even be receptive at this time? If you consider these people or systems critical to your efforts, how might you cultivate receptivity?
- What people or segments of your community are likely to be most receptive to asset building or might already be engaged in asset building? How can you tap them as allies and resources for spreading, deepening, or linking asset-building efforts in your community?
- How might you focus your efforts in response to this change pathway? What strategies might be needed to move many people in the community to their next phase of growth?
- What organizations, networks, or community sectors still need to be involved? How can you identify asset champions for those groups?

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Visit www.search-institute.org/research/change for updates and information on this change framework, including an on-line bulletin board and updates from case studies that are examining this change pathway in several communities.

WHAT ROLES WILL YOU PLAY IN PROMOTING ASSET BUILDING?

Asset-building efforts expand throughout a community when several individuals are inspired to become asset builders in their own lives *and* become passionate about spreading the word to others. Some do this through personal conversations with friends, families, and colleagues. Others reach out through presentations to parent-teacher-student organizations, service clubs, congregations, and other large groups. Some focus on organizational newsletters, congregational bulletins, in-service training, or community education. Others use their influential positions to convene leaders and other residents to start planning.

- What is your circle of influence? Where do you have influence, formal or informal, or relationships in your community?
- Who can you invite to join you in promoting asset building? How will you reach them?

4 ACTION: MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

In this phase, the challenge is to support both formal and informal asset-building activities and to initiate new activities that enhance asset-building capacity. You can:

- Intentionally infuse asset building into existing initiatives, programs, and activities that address a variety of interests, priorities, and levels of commitment.
- Equip, network, support, and recognize asset-building champions and leaders.

5 CONTINUITY: ENSURING THAT THE CHANGE BECOMES A WAY OF LIFE

Sustaining and deepening the commitment to asset building must become habitual and integrated into the activity of the individual, organization, and community. You can:

- Celebrate and [illegible]
- Monitor the [illegible]

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Leadership Jazz

Sometimes people wonder about how they can "orchestrate" a community asset-building initiative. In many ways, though, a community asset-building initiative is more like a jazz combo than an orchestra. There isn't a clear score or a conductor who cues each section and paces the tempo and dynamics. Rather, all the players know the tune, listen to each other, and find the notes, rhythms, and dynamics that blend and harmonize. Sometimes the drummer takes the lead; other times it's the saxophonist. And the music is magic when the players know and trust each other, sometimes coming together as an ensemble and other times fading to backup so that a soloist can shine.

The same is true in asset-building communities. There is no script that says precisely what part each person in a community will play and when. Rather, there is a shared commitment to strengthening your community for children and adolescents, with all players offering their creativity, skills, resources, and imagination to create something new together.

HEALTHY COMMUNITIES
HEALTHY YOUTH

Connect with Other Healthy Communities · Healthy Youth Initiatives

Search Institute organizes its supports for asset-building communities through its Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth initiative. We offer a number of opportunities to link with and learn from other asset-building initiatives, including an annual national conference, on-line discussions, and other resources. Learn more about these and other opportunities through our Web site.

To help you connect with others, tell Search Institute about your initiative. There is no fee for registering, but your initiative needs to meet the following criteria:

- Use of the framework of developmental assets as a focal point or foundation;*
- Active engagement of youth in the initiative;
- Involvement of at least three sectors (such as education, government, health, faith community, or business); and
- Openness to sharing information and learning with other communities and with Search Institute.

To register your initiative, call 800-888-7828 or visit www.search-institute.org/communities/network.

* Communities may be using other models in addition to developmental assets, such as Communities That Care, America's Promise, Asset-Based Community Development, or Character Counts. Indeed, we encourage communities to utilize any complementary models, resources, or approaches that strengthen their asset-building efforts.

Dedication
In memory of Dr. Carl A. Holmstrom, 1935–2001, an asset-building pioneer, who led the launching of Children First in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, the nation's first asset-building initiative, and who became a champion for asset building across the United States.

About Search Institute
Search Institute is an independent, nonprofit, nonsectarian organization whose mission is to advance the well-being of children and youth by generating knowledge and promoting its application. The institute collaborates with others to promote long-term organizational and cultural change that supports its mission.

About Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth
Search Institute's Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth initiative seeks to motivate and equip individuals, organizations, and their leaders to join together in nurturing competent, caring, and responsible children and adolescents. Major corporate support for this initiative is provided by Lutheran Brotherhood, a faith-based, member-owned financial services organization of 1.2 million Lutherans nationwide. Lutheran Brotherhood helps its members achieve financial security in the context of linking faith, values, and finances. Lutheran Brotherhood serves the Lutheran community as a resource for financial education, charitable outreach, and volunteer service.

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